

WATERFOWL ISSUES AND ANSWERS

Photo Omitted

IS 2002 A YEAR FOR CHANGE?

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CRAIG BIHRLE

North Dakota and many other northern states may have an opportunity to add a week onto the beginning of their duck seasons starting this fall. Or they may not.

It all depends on a number of factors, including a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decision on extending the season frameworks states must use to set their duck seasons, and dry conditions throughout much of North America's Prairie Pothole Region – that part of the north central U.S. and central Canada that produces most of the ducks migrating through the continent's mid-section.

Some of the uncertainty will clear by the time this magazine arrives in the mail. The FWS will announce in early June whether North Dakota and other states will have the option, under certain conditions, to open their duck seasons a week

earlier than previously allowed. IF that happens, the process involves more than just changing the historical opening date.

As summer progresses, North Dakota Game and Fish Department waterfowl managers will consider the possibilities and make final recommendations by early August. For the past several years, those recommendations have been similar. This year, however, significant change is possible.

At this date on the calendar – in early June – the only certainty is that North Dakota will have a duck season. It could be the same as last year. It could have an earlier start, an earlier end, or a reduced bag limit. A discussion of a few background issues should help waterfowl hunters better understand some of the options available to the Game and Fish Department.

CHANGING FEDERAL FRAMEWORKS

A framework is something like a boundary established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to manage duck and goose hunting seasons. Frameworks for each flyway include the earliest possible start date, the latest possible end date, and the number of days each state can have their season open between the starting and ending date. Frameworks also include the maximum daily bag limit a state can allow.

Northern states typically open their waterfowl seasons on the earliest possible date, southern states shoot for ending on the last possible open date, and mid-latitude states like Kansas and Missouri usually set their seasons somewhere in the middle.

On March 19, 2002, the FWS published in the Federal Register a proposal to extend the frameworks states use to set their waterfowl seasons. The Federal Register is the official daily publication for rules, proposed rules and notices of federal agencies and organizations, and March 19 was the first time the prospect of an earlier duck opener for northern states was offered as an official proposal, even though the idea has been debated among the FWS and many states for years.

"We've been working with the service to have early waterfowl openers for 40 years," according to Mike Johnson, the Game and Fish Department's migratory game management section supervisor.

The discussion has spanned five decades because duck hunters in northern parts of the United States have long felt short-changed by the number of days they actually get to hunt versus their southern counterparts. Last fall provides a relevant example. While federal frameworks allowed a 74-day duck season in North Dakota, an October 24 snowstorm blew most ducks from the northern part of the state. Since the duck season opened September 29, half the state had an effective duck season of less than 30 days.

Fortunately, the storm missed the southern part of the state. Ducks and geese accumulated there, mild weather returned, and decent waterfowl hunting was available through Thanksgiving. Even so, the duck season was effectively over at least two weeks before the calendar closed it officially. In most years, however, North Dakotans get perhaps 40 days before most ducks are gone, while southern states have open water and ducks the entire length of their seasons.

Under the current federal framework, the earliest a state can open its regular waterfowl season is the Saturday closest to October 1. In North Dakota, this means a range of dates from September 28 to October 4. The latest a southern state can have its season open is the Sunday nearest January 20. All states must establish their regular duck seasons within these two boundaries.

Some states do have exceptions; for example, some southern states have early teal seasons that do not count against regular season days.

The FWS proposal for 2002 would allow northern states to open their regular duck season on the Saturday closest to September 24, which gives North Dakota a range of the 21st through 27th. On the other end, southern states would be able to keep their seasons open through the last Sunday in January.

After the FWS published this proposal in the Federal Register, it accepted public comments through May 1. The FWS indicated it would announce its final decision on 2002 season frameworks in early June.

If, after assessing public comments, the FWS decides not to extend the framework, opening day in North Dakota will likely remain on the Saturday closest to October 1, which is September 28 in 2002.

If FWS does extend the opening-day framework for northern states, it brings into play some other considerations. Of particular significance is a duck harvest strategy called Adaptive Harvest Management. Under AHM, state and federal waterfowl biologists have established several "packages" that determine duck season length and bag limits based on a statistical formula that considers spring pond numbers and mallard breeding pairs in the Canadian portion of the Prairie Pothole Region.

Depending on these spring FWS survey results, duck season packages fall into one of four categories: 1) liberal; 2) moderate; 3) restrictive; or 4) very restrictive. Extended opening and closing dates are only available in 2002 if the AHM models provide for a liberal or moderate season package.

For the past several years the liberal package has governed duck season management. Given habitat conditions in Canada just prior to the spring breeding pair survey, it's possible the 2002 duck season could fall out of the liberal category. If that happens, the BIG question is: moderate or restrictive? The answer to that will evolve over the next two months and will determine the final frameworks established by the FWS in early August.

MORE ON AHM AND CURRENT HABITAT CONDITIONS

Since 1995, state and federal waterfowl managers have used Adaptive Harvest Management as the basis for setting duck seasons. It's a set of complicated statistical models that uses survey numbers, Johnson said, to select the duck season package that will, over the long run, provide for maximum hunter opportunity. The four established packages vary somewhat between flyways. In the Central

Photo omitted

Flyway, which includes North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas. **IF** the early season frameworks are approved, the AHM packages would be:

LIBERAL

Maximum season length: 74 days
Daily limit: 6 ducks including
5 mallards/2 hen mallards
Earliest opening date:
Saturday nearest September 24
Latest closing date:
Last Sunday in January

MODERATE

Maximum season length: 60 days
Daily limit: 6 ducks including
5 mallards/1 hen mallard
Earliest opening date:
Saturday nearest September 24
Latest closing date:
Last Sunday in January

RESTRICTIVE

Maximum season length: 39 days
Daily limit: 3 ducks including
3 mallards/1 hen mallard
Earliest opening date:
Saturday nearest October 1
Latest closing date:
Sunday nearest January 20

VERY RESTRICTIVE

Maximum season length: 25 days
Daily limit: 3 ducks including
3 mallards/1 hen mallard
Earliest opening date:
Saturday nearest October 1
Latest closing date:
Sunday nearest January 20

Realistically, the only difference between liberal and modified in North Dakota is the number of hen mallards in the daily bag limit – two in liberal vs. one in modified. The additional two weeks in the liberal package is seldom a factor because most ducks are gone by early November anyway, except perhaps along the Missouri River System.

The difference between modified and restrictive is obviously much more significant – a daily limit cut in half and a season length that does create the potential for duck season closing on the calendar before Mother Nature sends most of the birds south.

The factor that waterfowl managers will watch closely this summer involves the dividing lines between the three packages. “Moderate is a very narrow band between liberal and restrictive,” Johnson stated. “It can jump very quickly, with only a small change in breeding population or pond numbers, from one to the other.”

And therein lies the possibility that even if the FWS offers a framework extension, states might not be able to use it.

“We’ve had the package liberal ever since we’ve started AHM,” Johnson stressed, “but now we’re starting to dry up and the (mallard) breeding population is starting to go down, and we’re expecting this year that we could go from liberal to moderate, or maybe even liberal to restrictive.”

HABITAT CONDITIONS CREATE CONCERN

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service spring breeding pair and pond survey is based on the Canadian portion of the Prairie Pothole Region. Pothole country in Canada includes much of southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and the only portion that wasn’t dry heading into the first week in May, according to Johnson, was extreme southeastern Manitoba.

While data from North Dakota is not included in the FWS/CWS survey that determines the appropriate AHM package, the Game and Fish Department does have its own spring breeding pair and pond survey. While the state received some measurable rain and snow from early to mid-May, Johnson anticipates a noticeable drop in the number of small ponds over much of the state.

“We’ve had no significant moisture since last July,” he said.

What that means, Johnson explained, is fewer temporary and seasonal wetlands on the landscape. “We have a lot of ‘fish’ water,” he said, referring to larger pothole country water basins that are still full to overflowing following several years of above-normal precipitation, “but we don’t have, over much of the state, as much water that’s important to early nesting ducks.”

While North Dakota still has a lot of water, receding shorelines were evident in much of pothole country in early May 2002. A dry summer, fall and winter evaporated the moisture from many temporary wetlands (inset) that are beneficial to breeding ducks in spring.



The type of water that ducks need early is shallow ponds that warm up quickly and produce aquatic invertebrates. Such ponds typically accumulate from snow melt or significant spring rains, provide space and food for breeding ducks, and often dry up over the summer.

If the number of small ponds declines, so too could the number of breeding ducks in North Dakota. “We may not see as many birds stop here,” Johnson predicted. “They may move to areas where there’s more water.”

In the short term, that’s not necessarily a negative development. The productivity of the prairie wetland landscape evolved with wet and dry cycles. North Dakota’s prairie wetland environment has benefited from a wet cycle since 1993. As small ponds dry up or shorelines recede, new plants grow in. When the water comes up again and floods the plants, the wetland basin is much more alive and valuable to breeding ducks.

“We had an unprecedented run,” Johnson said. “Never before have we seen that many wet years in a row. We kept building that breeding population. Now, it’s time to dry up. It’s a good thing to dry up.”

While the wet-dry cycle has served the prairie well in the long term, in the short term duck populations are prone to decline during dry years. If that happens, hunters may have to compensate with shorter seasons and reduced bag limits until pothole country is again refreshed.

EARLY OPENING CONCERNS

If all the positive factors fall into place and North Dakota is offered the opportunity to open its duck season on September 21 (regular goose season would still open on September 28) in 2002, the Game and Fish Department then has to decide whether it will take advantage of the extra days. This option would be available for the next three years.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity an earlier season opener would present relates to hunting blue-winged teal. While bluewings are the most common breeding duck in North Dakota – in some years they represent 30-40 percent of all breeding ducks in the state – they migrate early and are seldom plentiful when waterfowl season typically opens.

If an extended season was available, Johnson indicated he would especially promote teal opportunities. “You get out there in the middle of September,” he said with enthusiasm, “and those bluewings are moving through and they’re fat, and there’s lots of them.”



A wetland changes over time. Above: August 1989 – wetland in Burleigh County is cracked-mud dry. Center: August 1993 – same wetland is alive with water and cattails for the first time in five years. Below: May 2002 – still holds water, but vegetation coverage is much reduced after nine years without going dry.

In addition, wood ducks are also early migrants, Johnson noted. While wood ducks are scarce on the prairie, they are numerous along some of the state's rivers, including the Missouri, Red, Sheyenne and James. "For people who want to specifically hunt wood ducks, it would be a great opportunity."

While Game and Fish and many state duck hunters have pursued earlier duck seasons for a long time, not all hunters think shooting ducks in mid-September is such a good idea. Some birds are not fully colored and species and sex are sometimes difficult to identify. On the other hand, duck hunting seasons in Canada open much earlier than in the U.S. In northern portions of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the two provinces immediately north of North Dakota, duck season opened on September 1 in 2001. In the southern portions of these two provinces, the 2001 duck season opened September 8.

Department administrators are aware of this and several other concerns that must be worked out if an extended duck season is offered. Some of these include:

- The possible early opening date would conflict with the youth waterfowl season the state has held in past years. Unless the rule changes, the youth waterfowl season must be held within 14 days of the regular waterfowl season opening or closing date, or within a split part of the season, and it has to be on a weekend.

- With an earlier opening date option, North Dakota could end up in the "restrictive" AHM package more often than would be the case with historic duck season openers. Game and Fish and state hunters might have to accept that trade-off in some years in order to have earlier hunting opportunities in other years.

Even without the possibility of an earlier opening in September, 2002 may be a transition year for duck hunting in North Dakota. Things have been good, but subtle indicators suggest a temporary swing from ideal habitat and duck numbers.

The indicators do not, however, suggest a need to panic, only a need for realization and awareness that the prairie pothole duck factory does change. Over the next couple of months, we'll learn just how much change has occurred.

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EARLY DUCK SEASONS AN OLD ISSUE

In the mid-1960s, North Dakotans gladly accepted an opportunity to have a special early teal season – a chance to hunt these birds when they were in the state in great numbers, compared to the regular duck season opener, by which time most blue-winged teal had headed south.

Unlike this year's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposal that might lead to a one week earlier duck season opener, the first option in 1965 was a nine-day season for teal only. It started well before the typical early October duck season, on September 4. Only blue-winged teal, green-winged teal and cinnamon teal were legal game.

The next two years the state also had an early teal season, with opening dates falling on September 2 and 3.

In 1968, because of lower duck numbers continentally, the early teal season was not offered. It resumed again in 1969, starting on September 6, but that was the last year for a special teal-only season.

The following year the Fish and Wildlife Service developed a new plan that allowed for "bonus" teal during the early part of the regular duck season. If the daily limit was four, for instance, a hunter could take four ducks, then an additional two blue-winged teal. This option, along with bonus scaup during the latter part of the season, was offered most duck seasons through 1987.

The drought years of 1988-92 took away all opportunities for bonus ducks in North Dakota. Seasons were shortened and opening day was actually delayed a week in a couple of those years.

A recent lobbying effort for an earlier duck season, beyond annual input from Game and Fish Department biologists, involved the state legislature in 1997. In a Senate Concurrent Resolution sponsored by senators Traynor, O'Connell and Sand, and representatives Henegar, Nicholas and Soukup, state lawmakers urged the Game and Fish Department to "make a request of the Secretary of the Interior and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to open the North Dakota waterfowl hunting season by September 15 of each year..."